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ABSTRACT

This article explores one language arts educator's attempts to understand the resistance, hostility, and denial that white, middle class preservice teachers in an undergraduate children's literature course exhibited when confronted with opportunities to conduct sociopolitical critiques of children's books. Originally, the educator, an African American, had hostile reactions from student teachers when examining black/racial issues within children's literature. The educator decided to conduct research during the next semester to understand the resistance, hostility, and denial. In order to prevent students from situating her as an African American woman with an agenda, she used literature featuring Asian Americans and books with very obvious racial stereotypes. She also chose books with gender stereotypes. Students discussed the books, responded in writing, and completed surveys. The teacher coded their responses for three themes: cynicism and the perception that children will not notice such things are an indication that they themselves do not notice such things; reluctance to do critical self-reflection in regard to racial issues; and positive feelings toward a book may inhibit critical examination of it. Students' responses indicated a level of anger, hostility, defensiveness, denial, and avoidance. (Contains 16 references.) (SM)

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"But That's One Of My Favorite Books!": Conducting Sociopolitical Critiques Of Children's Literature With Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

This article explores the attempts of a language arts educator to explain and understand the resistance, hostility and denial that mostly white, middle-class preservice teachers in an undergraduate children's literature course exhibited when confronted with opportunities to conduct sociopolitical critiques of children's books.

"There's no such thing as a politically innocent picture book."

(Fox, 1993, p. 656)

Children's literature is political in that it reflects the perspectives, worldviews, cultural norms and biases of its creators. Nodelman (1996) states:

> Because writers assume that their own ideology is universal truth, texts always act as a subtle kind of propaganda, and tend to manipulate unwary readers into an unconscious acceptance of their values. . . But if we notice the absences in a text and think about the ideology they imply, we can protect ourselves from unconscious persuasion. Rather than allowing ourselves to become immersed in a text to the point of accepting its description of reality as the only true one, we can define its values and so arrive at a better understanding of our own. In other words, instead of going along with the values a text implies, we can read against it (p. 120-121).

As a language arts educator, who teaches an undergraduate children's literature course to preservice teachers, I firmly believe that children's literature can serve as a valuable tool to aid future educators in developing a social critical consciousness. One incident that took place last year sparked my interest in the resistance of preservice teachers to address sociopolitical dimensions within the context of children's literature. What follows is an account of that incident, a description of the research that I conducted along with the findings, theoretical explanations and reasons as to why research such as this is significant.

I introduced the controversial "right to write" debate by sharing a children's book entitled The Wagon (Johnston, 1996). The story begins with the birth of a boy who is born a slave and it follows him throughout his childhood as he, along with his family, struggles to endure the harsh realities of slavery. On one occasion he is whipped and his grandma attempts to comfort him by saying "Yours is not the only troubled soul. Mr. Lincoln is sometimes overcome with gloom. Sees the country ripped to rags, as if two furious folks was tugging at a beautiful quilt" (unnumbered pages). Later in the story the text reads "As war spread, talk spread, how the president was torn over the wrong of slavery. How maybe he would free all slaves" (unnumbered pages). As the story progresses, Abraham Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation and the boy and his family rejoice, that is, until they hear the news of Lincoln's assassination. The story ends with the boy and his family leaving the farm in a wagon, which the boy's father had built, to attend Abraham Lincoln's funeral.

As I shared this book with the students, most of whom were white, middle-class females, I asked them to contemplate whether or not the author of this book was an African American. The majority of the students assumed incorrectly that the author was an African American simply due to the fact that the protagonists were black. However, two of the African American students were not convinced that the author was an African American and upon questioning one of the students as to why she felt this way, she responded that the depiction of Abraham Lincoln was an indication to her that the author was a cultural outsider.

I explained to the students that as a result of the manner in which people of color are acculturated, the way in which they write about their experiences will usually differ from the way that whites write about their experiences and I proceeded to conduct a sociopolitical critique of this book. I define a sociopolitical critique as reading against a text in order to uncover its hidden social and political assumptions (Nodelman, 1996). When I step back from this book and read against it, I notice several underlying assumptions that I challenge. First of all, the author assumes that Abraham Lincoln was more troubled over the wrongs of slavery than he was over the dissolution of the Northern and Southern states. Was his decision to free the slaves a moral decision or a political one? Consider the following statements made by Lincoln (as quoted in Wannamaker, 1996, p. 194) in regard to his position about the treatment of blacks:

> July 1858 - Let us discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man, this race and that race and the other race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position. Let us discard all these things, and unite as one people throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up declaring that all men are created equal.
>
> September 1858 - I will say then, that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races; that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people . . . And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the

position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.

In all fairness to the author, one could argue that at the time the story took place, many African Americans may have thought that Abraham Lincoln freed them for moral reasons, but I would question why an author writing in the 20th century would choose to depict Abraham Lincoln as an "abolitionist" in the face of conflicting evidence such as the aforementioned statements. Also, is it logical to assume that within a few days of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation that African Americans would have equal rights and be able to safely attend the funeral procession? The problems that African Americans face did not end with slavery and I would argue that racism continues to exist and because of it slavery occurred. This way of thinking parallels current perceptions by many whites that with the passage of civil rights legislation, such as affirmative action, blacks now have equal access to the American dream. My contention here is not that all of my assertions about Abraham Lincoln or this story are correct because they reflect my opinions and my biases however I believe it is this sort of critical literacy that preservice teachers should begin to demonstrate.

I was not prepared for the hostile and defensive reactions from the preservice teachers as a result of my sociopolitical critique of this children's book. Many of them engaged in behavior which Christine Sleeter (1996) labels as "white racial bonding". Sleeter (1996) states:

> By "racial bonding", I mean simply interactions in which whites engage that have the purpose of affirming a common stance on race-related issues, legitimating particular interpretations of groups of color, and

drawing conspiratorial we-they boundaries. These interaction patterns take such forms as inserts into conversations, race-related "asides" in conversations, strategic eye contact, jokes and code words (p. 149-150).

Students stared angrily at me, rolled their eyes and the silence was deafening. I asked them to respond in writing since it was obvious that they had much to say about my interpretation of the book. Upon reading the reactions later that evening, I realized that addressing racial issues within the context of children's literature had generated an enormous amount of discomfort and animosity among many of the mostly white, preservice teachers towards me, whom I believed they situated as an African American with an agenda that a white person might not have. I decided that the next semester that I would conduct research in order to understand why preservice teachers exhibit such resistance, hostility and denial when given opportunities to conduct sociopolitical critiques of children's literature.

Description of Research/Findings

In order to prevent students from situating me as an African American woman with an agenda, I decided that I would avoid using African American children's literature to address racism and racial stereotypes. Instead, I chose to incorporate literature featuring Asian Americans and I also decided to choose books that contained blatant racial stereotypes such as The Five Chinese Brothers (Bishop & Wiese, 1938) which would be more obvious as opposed to books such as The Wagon (Johnston, 1996) which is more subtle in terms of its underlying assumptions about racial issues. Before reading The Five Chinese Brothers, a story of five brothers who are

able to avoid punishment by switching places because they look exactly alike, I led a discussion with students about prevailing stereotypes associated with people of Asian descent. Then I read the book and afterwards I asked questions in regard to whether or not this book perpetuated any of the stereotypes that had been mentioned in our discussion before reading the book. Students also were asked to write responses since not all class members expressed their opinions to the entire class and may have felt more comfortable putting their thoughts on paper.

Because many of the students were white females, I thought that it might be wise to address sexism within the context of children's literature by sharing books that challenged gender stereotypes such as Princess Smartypants (Cole, 1986)) a story of a princess who is perfectly happy being a Ms., who decides that she doesn't want to marry; even after she meets "Mr. Right." I wondered if students would be more likely to discuss issues related to sexism, since they were females themselves who may have been subjected to discrimination based on their gender. Before reading Princess Smartypants, I presented them with research indicating that girls and boys receive different schooling experiences. For instance, Sadker and Sadker (1994) found that many teachers routinely called on girls to help more with housekeeping tasks and didn't encourage them to excel in math and science. I engaged students in conversations after reading the books and asked them to respond in writing to our discussions and express their opinions. All of the students were also asked to complete a grounded survey near the end of the course in which they disagreed or agreed on a scale of 1 to 5 with certain statements that I created related to the politics of children's literature.

Because there were approximately thirty students in the class, in order to more efficiently manage and analyze my data, I chose five white preservice teachers whose responses I would code and categorize. Two of the five were initially resistant and remained so throughout the quarter while the next two were initially resistant but became somewhat more receptive towards the end of the course. The last student was initially receptive and remained so throughout the course. I used qualitative research methodology to analyze my data and I read through all of the five preservice teachers' responses and coded for themes using colored pencils.

I generated the following five codes:

- Defending the book/Denial that the book may be problematic
- Children are incapable of noticing stereotypes and other "isms"
- Affection or positive attitudes towards the book
- Cynicism/We're reading too much into the book
- Acknowledgment of possible stereotypes or problematic aspects.

I later merged these codes to generate three major categories:

- Cynicism and the perception that children won't notice "such things" are an indication that they themselves don't notice such things.
- Reluctance to do critical self-reflection in regard to racial issues
- Positive feelings toward a book may inhibit critical examination of it.

Theoretical Explanations

I used the following theoretical positions to inform and make sense of my findings: critical race theory (CRT), a white identity orientation model developed by Gary Howard (1999), social dominance theory, DuBois' (1903;1953) notion of "double consciousness", social reproduction theory and grounded theory concerning the role of emotions and positive feelings towards books. Critical race theory helped to shed light on many preservice teachers' inability to notice "such things" as blatant racial stereotypes which were present in children's books (even after I pointed them out) that were read during class sessions. For instance, The Five Chinese Brothers (Bishop & Wiese, 1938) contains several obvious racial stereotypes concerning people of Asian descent, yet many of the students didn't see anything at all wrong with this book. A key notion of CRT is that racism and racial stereotypes are such "permanent fixtures" in American society that people often see them as normal and not aberrant (Bell, 1992). One student wrote:

> I did not feel that The Five Chinese Brothers is a stereotype of book. One reason is that the book, in my opinion, does not state anything that would make me think of a Chinese person. If the book was just titled The Five Brothers, besides the pictures, I would have no idea that it was about Chinese people or not (personal communication, 2001).

The illustrations in this book depict the five Chinese brothers as looking exactly like, with yellow skin and slits for eyes, yet this student defends the book and "deracializes" it.

Gary Howard (1999) is the director of the REACH Center for Multicultural Education and he has created a model of white identity development that relates to different ways of being white which offers explanations for the reluctance of preservice teachers to do critical self-reflection. The model recognizes three white identity orientations: fundamentalist, integrationist and transformationist white identity. His model addresses how whites think, act and feel about racism. For the purposes of this research study, I focused on the fundamentalist orientation since my goal was to understand and explain preservice teachers' resistance to conducting sociopolitical critiques of children's literature.

According to Howard (1999), fundamentalist whites are "literal and linear thinkers regarding issues of race and whiteness. They are fixed and rigid in their cognitive functioning and immutably committed, either consciously or unconsciously to the assumption of white supremacy" (p. 99). In terms of how they feel, fundamentalist whites respond with anger when confronted with their own racism. It is likely that students were uncomfortable with doing critical self-reflection because they may not have been pleased with the racial and cultural baggage that they would most likely find as a result of being socialized in a society that is fundamentally racist. Consider the following statement made by a student after a group activity in which I asked the class to conduct sociopolitical critiques of children's literature for racial stereotypes:

> There's racism, prejudism (sic), and stereotyping, etc. everywhere against every single type of person. It's just something everyone needs to learn to deal with it and just quit crying about it. It will never change and will always be a catch 22 (personal communication, 2001).

This student's response seems to indicate a level of anger, hostility and defensiveness. Howard (1999) also states that "people from other races and cultures, or other white people who espouse different definitions of truth, are responded to with fear, hostility and avoidance" (p. 101). This would explain some of the students' attitudes when I conducted the sociopolitical critique of The Wagon . My interpretation was very different from their interpretation, so they responded with hostility and wanted to avoid the issue. In terms of how they act, fundamentalist whites resist multicultural education and expect people of color to assimilate (Howard, 1999).

Social dominance theory contends that the way in which people view the world is connected to their position of dominance and subordination within it (Howard, 1999). So for instance, a white male is likely to view the world quite differently from a black male. Also, would that white student who commented that people should quit crying about racism, prejudice and stereotypes be as likely to feel this way if she were an African American, for example? Social dominance theory ties in with W.E.B. DuBois' (1903;1953) notion of "double consciousness" because people of color, such as myself, tend to think critically about racial issues on a daily basis since it's a matter of survival and navigation in a world dominated by whites. Because of their position of dominance, many whites don't have to think

critically about racial issues. Therefore, could whites be at a disadvantage when conducting sociopolitical critiques because of their position of dominance? In order to illustrate this point, I would like to describe an incident that took place between a colleague of mine and his brother-in-law.

My colleague is an African American male whose wife is bi-racial. Her mother is white and her father is black but they divorced when she was an infant and her mother remarried a white man and had more children, so she has white siblings. One night my colleague, a black male, and his brother-in-law, a white male, were searching for a gas station. Upon passing several gas stations, the brother-in-law asked my colleague why he hadn't stopped at any of them. My colleague explained to him that because he was a young black male, he avoided going into gas stations late at night and would stop only where he could make a purchase outside. This sort of critical thinking about race on the part of my colleague is typical for people of color who not only see themselves through their own eyes but also through the eyes of the dominant societal group (DuBois, 1903;1953). However, it is not typical for whites because it isn't usually necessary.

Social reproduction theory was insightful as well because it helped to explain the resistance and hostility preservice teachers exhibited when asked to conduct sociopolitical critiques of children's literature. A key notion of social reproduction theory is that people are socialized to maintain the social order status quo (Laurel Richardson, personal communication, 2001). Ironically, even oppressed groups work to maintain the social order although it functions to their detriment. Take for example, this female student's response to sociopolitical critiques of children's literature for gender

stereotypes: She states "I feel that we are being overly critical when it comes to sexism in literature. A book can simply be a book without reading too much into it" (personal communication, 2001). Similarly, when working with Brazilian peasants, Paulo Freire (1970) discovered that they believed God had determined their fates as opposed to structures that man had put in place. Freire (1970, p. 61-62)) states:

> Under the sway of magic and myth, the oppressed (especially the peasants, who are almost submerged in nature) see their suffering, the fruit of exploitation, as the will of God - as if God were the creator of this "organized disorder". Submerged in reality, the oppressed cannot perceive clearly the "order" which serves the interests of the oppressors whose image they have internalized.

Because they believed that God was responsible for their condition, the peasants, by not critically understanding and questioning their circumstances, were reproducing the social order status quo.

Lastly, I generated a grounded theory based on one of the five students who simply refused to acknowledge that The Five Chinese Brothers was in any way problematic. Near the beginning of the course, she wrote "The Five Chinese Brothers was one of my favorite books when I was young. I never thought of it as stereotyping. The whole book is an exaggeration - a story to entertain" (personal communication, 2001). Near the end of the course, I hadn't made a dent in this students' position as is obvious based on her written response as to whether or not her perspective on this book had changed. She wrote:

> The Five Chinese Brothers was one of my favorite books when I was young. I didn't think about Chinese people looking alike at all - I just thought the story was clever. I think it is fine for young kids (personal communication, 2001).

Because of this student, I theorized that having an emotional attachment to a book may inhibit the ability to critique it since emotion and cognition are interrelated. In light of this theoretical explanation, one can understand why criticisms directed at books which perpetuate stereotypes such as The Story of Little Black Sambo and The Indian in the Cupboard are dismissed by literary critics and educators who focus solely on the literary aspects of the book.

Ironically, analysis of the grounded survey responses of the five preservice teachers provided me with disconfirming data. Students who were resistant to conducting sociopolitical critiques answered statements in ways that were inconsistent with their written responses. For example, the student who commented that The Five Chinese Brothers was one of her favorite books and that she thought it was fine for young children provided incongruous responses on the survey. She responded to the following statement "Children's literature should be exempt from scrutiny due to the intended audience" with "strongly agree" and then she wrote "Because of their intended audience they should be scrutinized - Young minds are very suggestible and should be guided" (personal communication, 2001). It is interesting to note that on the survey her answer appears to be "politically correct", yet when given opportunities to "practice what she preached" and

scrutinize a book that has been highly criticized for its portrayal of Asian Americans, she resisted.

Significance

Research with preservice teachers related to the politics of children's literature is significant for several reasons. First of all, children's books are vehicles for transmitting information, values, cultural norms and beliefs to children. However, they are not created in vacuums by individuals with "blank slates" and consequently are not free of societal ills such as sexism, racism and classism as many of the preservice teachers falsely believed. Secondly, teachers must realize that children's books are also political in that they aid in the socialization of children who will later become adults and they reproduce the values of dominant groups such as European Americans, males and the middle class (McGillis, 1996). Teachers should be aware of this so they can make wise choices in terms of books to share with children and how to use them. It is also important to help teachers realize the potential of children's literature in aiding children with the development of a social critical consciousness. Teachers can use children's literature to not only teach children to read the word, but more importantly to read the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Hollindale (1988) states:

> It might seem that values whose presence can only be convincingly demonstrated by an adult with some training in critical thinking skills are unlikely to carry much potency with children. More probably the reverse is true: the values at stake are usually those which are taken for granted by the writer, and reflect the writer's integration in a society which unthinkingly accepts them. In turn this means that

> children, unless they are helped to notice what is there, will take them for granted too. Unexamined passive values are widely shared values, and we should not under-estimate the powers of reinforcement vested in quiescent and unconscious ideology (p. 12-13).

Because of the diversity and inequalities within the nation's schools, children's literature can be used with preservice teachers to help them become more aware of social inequities and injustices within the American educational system. Confronting issues like racism, classism and sexism forces an individual to examine how he or she has been affected by these "isms". When looking at the depiction of females in children's literature, I reflected on how I treated my girls differently from my boys as a former classroom teacher. Examining issues pertaining to race, class and gender within the context of children's literature can assist preservice teachers in breaking down some of their stereotypes and misconceptions about children from different socioeconomic and racial groups. Critical self-reflection will aid preservice teachers in becoming successful, effective classroom teachers who can help children from marginalized groups to achieve academic success.

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